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RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 9379  
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON PRIORITY 2580  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1339  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1853  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 6715  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 5228  
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 6108  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 000208

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/26/2019  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KJUS](#) [TH](#)  
SUBJECT: ONE MONTH CHECK: AMBASSADOR'S INTERLOCUTORS  
DISCUSS PM ABHISIT'S START, EX PM-THAKSIN/OPPOSITION

REF: 2008 BANGKOK 3226 (HOPE FOR MEDIATION)

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

1. (C) One month into the government of PM Abhisit Vejjajiva, a series of interlocutors shared generally positive impressions of the new PM's initial weeks in office with Ambassador but seemed more animated discussing the opposition, particularly ex-PM Thaksin Shinawatra's lingering influence from abroad. Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda told the Ambassador that PM Abhisit was well-qualified to lead the government and could perform well; Prem believed former PM Thaksin, a fugitive overseas, was seeking to maintain his public profile and should be imprisoned if he returned to Thailand. Separately, former PM Anand Panyarachun told the Ambassador that Abhisit had done well during his first month in office. Anand praised Army Commander Anupong Paojinda for having refrained from intervening in politics, claiming Anupong had understood King Bhumibol's desire for a peaceful political transition without military interference. Separately, Noppadon Pattama, who served as Foreign Minister in the (pro-Thaksin) Samak administration, predicted that protests against the current government would remain essentially peaceful. Noppadon believed pro-Thaksin figures should not risk discrediting themselves but should allow time to erode Abhisit's positive image. Noppadon also bemoaned the lack of capable politicians able to lead the Puea Thai party, as most of Thaksin's allies among senior politicians had been disenfranchised by Constitutional Court rulings.

2. (C) Comment: The Ambassador's conversations with these significant interlocutors reinforced our own view that PM Abhisit is off to a reasonably good start, but that his government faces significant policy challenges given the current economic situation in Thailand and globally, and that Thaksin and "redshirts" remain forces to be reckoned with. Given that the "redshirt" anti-government protesters have thrown eggs at a former Prime Minister and rocks at Democrat MPs' cars, we are unsure whether Noppadon spoke with authority or simply expressed his own hope when he claimed these demonstrators would remain within reasonable bounds to

preserve their credibility. End Summary and Comment.

PRIVY COUNCILORS PRAISE ABHISIT, STILL WARY OF THAKSIN

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13. (C) In a January 22 lunch with Ambassador, DCM, and PolCounselor, Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda described PM Abhisit as "clean" and "one of the best we have." Prem hoped the government would get off to a good start. Prem and Privy Councilor Siddhi Savetsila were considerably more animated about ex-PM Thaksin and his supporters. Prem stated that Thaksin would not stop his political efforts; he would keep trying to protect and promote himself. Siddhi claimed that anti-government protestors were losing credibility as a result of their actions, such as throwing eggs at their opponents (such as former PM Chuan). He suggested the tactics were designed simply to keep the protestors, and by extension Thaksin, in the news. Prem added that this type of motive was also behind Thaksin's talking up an alleged assassination plot (possibly that in reftel).

14. (C) The Ambassador said he could easily imagine two scenarios for Thaksin going forward: stay abroad and fight, while slowly losing influence here in Thailand; or come back, go to jail, and hope for a pardon as part of a deal. Prem replied that he considered it "almost impossible" for Thaksin to come back, because he did not think Thaksin would ever agree to go to jail. Prem added that Thaksin was a very dangerous man and should be jailed, not traveling abroad. Prem claimed that the Chinese Ambassador had told him that the PRC would not welcome Thaksin visiting China again (note: after the 2006 coup, Thaksin spent significant time in Hong Kong, occasionally traveling to Beijing).

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EX-PM ANAND: ARMY HEEDED KING'S WISHES; ABHISIT GOOD START

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15. (C) Separately, former PM Anand Panyarachun remarked to Ambassador in a January 23 office call that the political situation seemed to have stabilized. A peaceful change of government was the outcome he had long hoped for, with no need to resort to military power. Anand said he gave great credit to Army Commander Anupong -- in the past, military leaders interpreted the King's or Queen's remarks in a way that furthered their selfish interests. But Anand believed Anupong had correctly understood a "signal" from the King that no coup should take place.

16. (C) Anand said it was a pity there was not sufficient appreciation that the King helped to usher in this peaceful change -- in his "shrewd, diplomatic" manner, the King had resisted attempts to pressure him to send a signal he favored change. (Comment: Anand may have been referring to widespread stories that the Queen pressed for a coup, but he was not explicit. End Comment.) The Ambassador noted that he had explained to his audiences that the December transition was consistent with parliamentary practices; Anand enthusiastically agreed and said many people in other countries did not understand parliamentary systems.

17. (C) Anand spoke well of Abhisit, saying he had been "quite adept" so far, with no gaffes. Anand predicted Abhisit's government would last two years; he was not very worried about the impact of "redshirt" anti-government protesters, but he said one key issue would be how Abhisit and the Democrats would be able to restrict the corruption of their coalition partners, especially as some huge infrastructure projects would be forthcoming. Anand praised Finance Minister Korn Chatikavanij (a close friend of Abhisit) as a "man of action" who should do well in his current role. As for Thaksin, Anand scoffed that Thaksin said publicly that he wanted a "quiet life," but he kept giving interviews that are "self-damaging."

¶18. (C) Former FM Noppadon Pattama, who had previously served as Thaksin's spokesman and lawyer, told Ambassador in a January 20 call at the Residence that Abhisit was trying to do a good job, but it was unclear whether the government would be able to stimulate the economy. If the ruling party failed in improving the economic climate, political instability would likely return, and Puea Thai would be well-positioned to form a government.

¶19. (C) In the short-term, Puea Thai was hamstrung by its struggles to find a good leader, Noppadon said. Court rulings against executives of the Thai Rak Thai and the People's Power Party had created a void in the top ranks of politicians allied with Thaksin. Yongyuth Wichaidith had only reluctantly accepted the Puea Thai leadership position, as he did not like politics. Puea Thai hoped that the Thai Pride Party (Phumjai Thai), the Democrats' largest partner in the government, would push for an amnesty that would restore political rights to those banned from political office for five years by Constitutional Court decisions. It was doubtful this would be pursued within the next six months, however, as the ruling coalition would most likely seek time to solidify its power before considering allowing banned politicians back into politics.

¶10. (C) With its own internal issues to deal with, Puea Thai was not planning to attack the government during the first few months of the year, Noppadon said. It was likely that public opinion would turn against Abhisit, and the press would start to attack the government. If this happened, Puea Thai would become an attractive alternative without having to tarnish its image by attacking the government.

¶11. (C) Noppadon said that the "redshirts" would protest at the upcoming ASEAN summit, but the protests would be polite.

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Protest leaders planned to take the high road and not follow the example of the People's Alliance for Democracy. Disruptive protests would cause the redshirt movement to lose legitimacy, a dangerous prospect considering that the elite, some members of the Privy Council, and the Army were already aligned against the redshirts.

JOHN